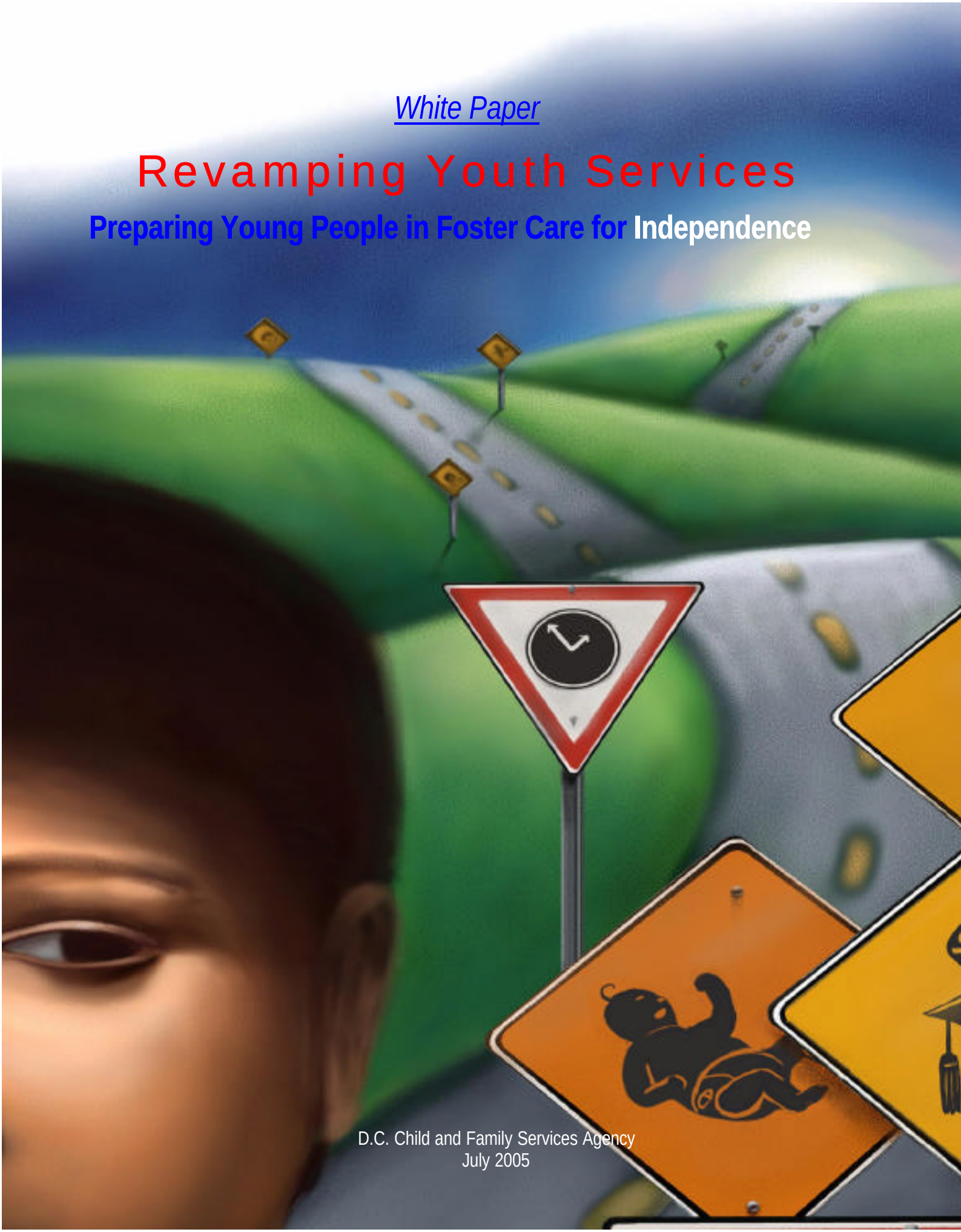
*White Paper*

# Revamping Youth Services

## Preparing Young People in Foster Care for Independence



D.C. Child and Family Services Agency
July 2005

On your child's 18th birthday, you tell him he has until dinnertime to leave your home. He has not yet graduated from high school. He does not have a job, place to live, or prospects for higher education, but you sever all ties anyway. Unthinkable? Think again! This is exactly what happens to most of the 20,000 young men and women who leave our nation's foster care system each year.

Locally, the good news is that the District is one of the few jurisdictions that keeps young people in foster care up to age 21. We provide generous monthly stipends for older teens learning to live on their own. We also pay tuition for any foster teen who wants to attend college—and then offer a temporary allowance during the transition period from student to working adult. The bad news is that past failures to keep families together and to find permanent homes for children who cannot return to their parents have left over 800 District youngsters, ages 16 to 21, growing up in foster care. That is one-third of the city's current foster child population.

As the "parent" of over 2,600 children of all ages in foster care, the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is attacking this issue on two fronts.

- **We are aggressively seeking prompt, safe, permanent solutions for every foster child and teen.** Our goal is for more children to grow up in families, not in foster care. All too often, child welfare systems rule out traditional forms of permanence (reunification with family, guardianship, or adoption) for older youth in care. All young people need permanent connections that will endure long after they reach adulthood. While not the permanent solution we seek, CFSA has managed to place approximately half of our older youth in family foster homes instead of in congregate settings (see box). Our goal is to reduce our reliance on congregate care even more by identifying more families willing to care for teens.

| Placement of District Foster Youth, Ages 16-21, May 2005 | |
|---|---|
| Foster home | 399 (50%) |
| Independent Living program | 195 (24%) |
| Other (residential treatment, hospital, correctional facility, abscondence) | 125 (16%) |
| Group home | 87 (11%) |
| Total | 806 (100%) |

*Source: CFSA FACES*

- **CFSA is overhauling services to do the best we can for all youth now growing up in foster care as a result of past systemic failures.** New programs will emphasize exactly what we stress with our own kids: earn a high school degree, gain work experience, master basic life skills, put off parenting, seek higher education, and maintain connections with supportive people.

Early in 2005, CFSA's Director established a Youth Advisory Committee of experts to inform this process. Committee members identified youth meeting any of the following criteria as among those requiring special attention and services: teen parents; teens not graduating from high school; those who have been in foster care for an exceptionally long time and/or have had multiple placements; those in college; "dual jacket" youth, involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems; youth who have run away; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. CFSA then conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with foster teens and

providers to gather input on what is working well in preparing youth in foster care for adulthood and where improvements can be made.

CFSA is grateful for the involvement and expertise of the Youth Advisory Committee in this project.

- Marilyn Egerton, Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center
- Thomas Gore, Associates for Renewal in Education
- Magistrate Judge S. Pamela Gray, D.C. Family Court
- Councilmember Vincent Gray, Council of the District of Columbia, Ward 7
- Louis Henderson, National Association of Former Foster Care Children of America
- Pamela Johnson, Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Magistrate Judge Juliet McKenna, D.C. Family Court
- Nadia Gold-Moritz, The Young Women's Project
- Greg Roberts, D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation
- Shane Salter, CASA for Children of the District of Columbia
- Evita Smedley, D.C. Action for Children
- Samuel Tramel, South Washington/West of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative

We are also grateful to Susan Punnett, consultant, who drafted this report.

## Background Information and Findings

CFSA used a three-pronged approach to gathering background information for this paper. It included a literature review of best practices; analysis of current practices, services, and resource gaps in the District; and input from stakeholders via focus groups and interviews.

### Research on Best Practices

While the practice of independent living is still fairly new within child welfare, issues that young adults face after leaving foster care have recently received greater attention in public policy and research. A mounting body of data shows a connection between growing up in foster care and adult homelessness, lower educational attainment, underemployment and unemployment, and incarceration.

While not specific to youth in foster care, some research focuses on preparing disconnected and/or low-income youth for adulthood. These findings also inform best practices for youth in foster care. This section summarizes results of the literature search of best practices.

**Preparing Youth for Adulthood**

Current research documents that youth in general (not just those in foster care) are reaching adulthood at an older age and after following a more circuitous path. They are living with parents longer or returning home more frequently, getting additional education, and delaying

marriage and children longer than previous generations.[1] This trend compounds the difficulty of preparing youth in foster care for adulthood when local child welfare services end at age 21 in the District. (Young adults, age 21, making satisfactory progress in accredited educational programs are eligible for limited additional support to age 23 through the federal Chafee Education and Training Voucher program.)

The National Child Welfare Resource Centers for Organizational Improvement and Youth Development have developed four core principles for preparing adolescents in foster care to be successful, self-sufficient adults: (1) youth development, (2) collaboration, (3) cultural competence, and (4) permanent connections. Current thinking is that a **youth development approach** best prepares young people for adulthood by engaging them in "a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems."[2] This approach involves adults moving from having a decisionmaking role in youths' lives to supporting them in making decisions about their own lives.

**Best Practices in Preparing Foster Youth for Adulthood**

- Adopting a youth development approach
- Comprehensive life skills training and "real world" opportunities to practice those skills
- Community links and collaboration
- Comprehensive educational support
- Comprehensive employment support
- Ensuring every youth has at least one ongoing connection to a supportive adult
- Support for family and youth around family issues
- Programs staffed with highly skilled individuals who receive ongoing training
- Sufficient time for youth to develop skills they need and/or after-care services.

While different studies and experts use different terms, recent work identifies a common set of best practices (listed at left). The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) defines the goal as preparing young adults to be "interdependent, not independent" to emphasize that youth need not only a discrete set of skills but also ability to meet their needs in all life domains within a framework of personal and community relationships. Ability to maintain relationships allows adults to succeed in life. CWLA defines interdependence as a two-part goal:

1. Lifelong connection to family (birth, kin, adoptive, or identified) supplemented by a strong social network of support.

2. Achievement of competence in the knowledge, skills, and relationships needed to participate successfully in family and community life as well as in the workplace.[3]

While not strictly an examination of best practices, *On Their Own* by Martha Shirk and Gary Strangler identifies three themes in profiles of young adults who had recently left foster care.[4] The first is the importance of family supports and social networks. As the authors state, "We already know from research in many fields that a connection to a knowledgeable and caring adult is the single most important contributor to resiliency in youth."[5] The second theme is the importance of preparation for independence, especially in financial matters where youth need the opportunity to fail and to learn from their failures before they are on their own. The third theme is the inherent potential for engagement and leadership in each individual and the negative consequences of not engaging youth while still in care.

**Life Skills**

Developing life skills is an obvious need of all adolescents, especially those in foster care. Having learned such skills is a major predictor of success for youth aging out of care.[6] The term

"life skills" covers a broad range of competencies. Youth who have experienced disruptions and trauma in foster care may not have even the most basic skills. Effective life skills programs must meet youth where they are and address the full continuum of skills.

One model of life skills development identifies four key areas—basic skills, employment skills, life skills, and psychosocial skills—and lays out a progression from foundation skills to midpoint indicators to preparedness indicators.[7] Another is a four-stage continuum of informal learning, formal learning, supervised practice, and self-sufficiency.[8] Life-skills training is more effective when taught in real-world settings rather than a classroom.[9]

One method of allowing young people to practice life skills is independent living in which youth live in apartments under the supervision and with support of a structured program. Research shows that independent living programs should be used for those youth who have shown their preparedness and commitment to succeed in an independent living setting. Independent living is not an effective solution for those being placed there as a result of difficulty in or dissatisfaction with a previous placement.[10]

**Education**

Minimal academic problems, earning a high school diploma, and access to post-secondary education (whether college or vocational training) are all predictors of better outcomes for youth leaving foster care.[11] Yet many youth in care (especially those who have experienced multiple placements) have not experienced success in school and, given past failures, are often completely unwilling to engage in educational programs. Too often, this becomes a barrier to success in other programs. For example, the need to get a high school diploma before enrolling in an employment program can be an almost insurmountable barrier. The result is that the youth achieves neither the diploma nor preparation for employment.

**Employment**

Youth preparing to live on their own must be able to obtain and maintain employment. Building an employment history while in foster care is essential. Youth who held a job while in care were more likely to be employed after leaving care.[12]

Disconnected youth face many obstacles, including lack of appropriate basic interpersonal and employment skills. However, some programs have been successful in preparing them for work. In the words of the director of a program for high school dropouts, "We know what works. You have to have a structure for these kids."[13]

Young adults who have been in successful employment programs believe the pre-employment training and life skills they received were critical to their success. This preparation filled a large gap in their knowledge base about how to interact and behave in the workplace. Edward DeJesus found: "Most young adults, when asked to name three things that the program taught them that they are using on their job today, responded: how to handle problems, how to get along with others, and how to work in a team. They also valued problem and conflict resolution, interviewing and job-keeping skills."[14]

Some key findings of a recent report by the Chapin Hall Center for Children are especially relevant to preparing youth in foster care. Creating employment programs in partnership with employers is critical. Such partnerships give low-income youth exposure to employment situations and resources and can help them to develop better educational and employment goals.

Another finding was that employers often have inappropriately low expectations for high school students and are often surprised at the ability of youth, when well prepared, to contribute effectively as members of a work team. Furthermore, employers found sufficient satisfaction in working with youth that "the tendency among the employers in this study was to extend and deepen contact with youth rather than curtail it."[15]

**Permanence/Lifelong Connections**

Unfortunately, child welfare systems too often decide that the case goal for older youth in foster care will no longer be a permanent family via reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption—or fail to encourage youth to "hang in there" while continuing to seek a permanent family for them. Fortunately, a number of programs are documenting success in helping older youth achieve permanence.[16] These programs are time intensive and must be truly youth-centered, working through family issues with the young person and involving him/her in decisionmaking.

Youth who age out of foster care should have a permanent connection to at least one adult who they can continue to turn to and rely on. The distinguishing factor of such a relationship is that it continues long after the youth has left foster care. The connection could be to a family member or unrelated individual such as a teacher, minister, or neighbor.

Numerous studies report the importance of family connections and significant number of youth who age out of care and return to live with family. In many cases, these are either the same family members from whom the youth was originally removed and/or those who had been ruled out as a permanent option. Experts point out the folly of ignoring these family connections and the need to help youth work through their feelings about family and develop more productive relationships with them.

Some young people establish an adult presence in their lives not through family relationships but through connection with an unrelated adult. A theme throughout this literature is the importance of one adult who believes in and is a consistent presence in a youth's life. Such an individual may be a part of and a major reason that a youth succeeds in an employment or educational program. He/she may be a staff member in a residential placement or a natural or assigned mentor.

Many young adults who had been successful in youth employment programs spoke to the impact of staff. DeJesus noted: "This person advocated on their behalf and made the extra attempt to help. But most important was the feeling that someone was there for them to talk with about issues, needs and even such matters as baseball scores and current events."[17] What the young adults cited most was "that the staff were genuine and concerned."[18]

While not a panacea, successful mentoring can play an important role in the lives of disconnected youth. Research confirms what many know intuitively: that maintaining a mentoring program requires a significant investment of time and effort.[19] Public/Private Ventures cautions against operating stand-alone mentoring programs when youth have multiple unmet needs, as the mentoring program cannot meet all those needs.

Other research points out that naturally formed mentoring relationships may be more enduring and influential than assigned mentoring relationships. Jean Rhodes asserts that "rather than assigning volunteer mentors, a more effective intervention approach may ultimately lie in teaching adolescents techniques for recruiting natural mentors or in structuring settings to facilitate more intergenerational contact."[20]

## Service Provision and Gap Analysis

District of Columbia programs to serve adolescents in foster care have many notable strengths. First, and probably most important, is that young people can stay in care until age 21 (as compared to age 18 in most jurisdictions), giving them three additional years to mature and achieve in terms of education, work experience, salary, and savings. The District has funding for and offers independent living services and supports to most youth ages 18 to 21 (in contrast to the many jurisdictions that offer only limited services to selected populations). At the same time, the District has been able to place a significant number of youth in family foster care settings. Many District youth get into and at least begin college.

Youth in foster care age 16 and older can receive services through the Center of Keys for Life (CKL), the CFSA life skills training program, which is specifically charged with preparing youth for self-sufficiency. All foster youth are eligible, but not all choose to participate. Among CKL services are life skills training, counseling, preparation and support for college enrollment, and continuing support for youth in college.

CFSA is preparing to use the Ansell-Casey life skills curriculum, which is widely recognized as state of the art. Educational support includes remedial assistance to support attainment of a high school diploma or GED, SAT and ACT preparation, college tours, and financial assistance for post-secondary education. Through the federal Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) program, youth up to age 23 are eligible for financial assistance for post-secondary educational and vocational experiences. The ETV program provides up to $5,000 per youth per year for tuition, books, equipment, supplies, and other expenses related to attending college or vocational training.

Many of the oldest youth in District care are in independent living programs. Licensing and contractual requirements ensure independent living programs provide specific services and supports to youth to help them prepare for living interdependently as adults. These include:

- A complete set of household furnishings and furniture, which the youth can keep upon leaving the program.
- Comprehensive life skills training.
- Recreational activities.
- A monthly stipend of $500 to cover expenses ($200 for food, $120 for clothing, $90 for transportation, $30 for toiletries, $60 for incidentals). Youth who reside in scattered site apartments receive an additional $700 per month for rent and utilities. Teen parents residing with their children receive an additional $125 per month per child.
- Weekly allowance of $20.

The District's seven unique Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives are located strategically throughout the city, and each is responsible for a specific catchment area. The Collaboratives have partnerships with formal and informal community-based organizations to meet service needs in their respective areas. Since 2004, CFSA has incorporated an after care component in the Collaboratives' contracts to serve youth who are aging out of foster care. This initiative provides youth with a community-based support network that will continue to be available after they leave foster care. Youth, their social workers, and Collaborative staff meet for a transition planning conference to hear the youth's needs and concerns and work with her/him to develop an ongoing support plan. Services include housing assistance, work

readiness preparation, parenting support, and referrals to other services and community-based resources.

In response to the affordable housing crisis in the District, CFSA has recently begun developing a Rapid Housing Program in partnership with the Collaboratives and the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness. It allows social workers to connect youth aging out of care with support for finding and maintaining affordable housing. Youth are eligible for financial support to help with security deposits, short-term rental subsidies, furniture and household items, utility bills, and payment of old bills to improve credit worthiness.

Based on an in-depth assessment, including credit checks and financial evaluation, the youth, social worker, and Collaborative develop a spending plan. Collaborative staff works with the youth to find housing and negotiate a rental amount based on knowledge of available housing and ongoing relationships with landlords in their communities. The Collaborative also provides transitional case management services to help the young adult remain in stable housing and avoid a housing crisis.

The District is also exploring proven models for helping older youth achieve permanence. CFSA is currently considering "Lifelong Family Connections" (the so-called Massachusetts model) and "Families for Teens" (a New York City model), both of which have been successful in helping teens in foster care achieve permanence.

- The Massachusetts model combines seven innovative, youth-centered, family-focused program components to assist in identifying, establishing, and sustaining lifelong family relationships on behalf of adolescents in foster care. The primary goal is to establish meaningful, permanent connections to significant adults while simultaneously identifying placements for the teens whenever possible.

- The New York model is a multi-prong approach that discourages Independent Living as a permanency goal, aggressively pursues reunification, helps youth who cannot reunify identify individuals who can serve as placement and/or permanency resources, and supports those placements to make them work.

Even with all these services and supports, the District still has work to do to eliminate some barriers to achieving better outcomes for youth. While some youth receive services through the Center for Keys for Life, many do not participate in CKL and rely on their foster parents or congregate care providers to help them prepare for adulthood. Group home programs provide little to no independent living preparation. Services are not coordinated or consistent across agencies or community-based independent living programs. Many youth move among placements and programs frequently, resulting in a lack of consistent services. According to a survey by the Young Women's Project of 44 youth, ages 14 to 20, living at five group homes and independent living programs, 68 percent had moved four or more times since entering the system. This underscores the lack of consistency and upheaval these youth experience.

To assess programming gaps, CFSA studied the services of existing independent living providers. We reviewed proposals that providers submitted during the contracting process and interviewed CFSA independent living program monitors. The analysis sought to correlate best practices identified in the literature review with reported practices in District independent living programs for foster youth.

This research showed that while aspects of best practice are present across all existing independent living programs, they are neither systematic nor consistent. In general:

- Services are not provided with a youth development philosophy, nor do agencies consistently provide youth development activities.

- While some agencies use a published life skills curriculum, others use their own or no curriculum. Few measure the effectiveness of what they are teaching.

- Most programs have some employment services, but the extent of services varies considerably across programs.

- While all programs have some links to community-based services, most are not extensive. The only consistent link is to the Collaboratives for after-care services. Generally, programs do not have connections to cultural or social organizations/outlets.

- Provision of health services that prepare youth to manage their own medical needs varies widely. Many youth—including some with documented chronic medical issues—are not getting the services they need and/or are missing medical appointments.

- Programs generally do not assist youth in identifying a mentor, relative, or staff member who will provide a permanent relationship or lifelong connection.

- Programs do not systematically provide after-care services, although some youth maintain contact with program staff and come back to them for advice or help. Some programs have hired program alumni as staff.

- No programs consistently assist youth in establishing, re-establishing, or working through redefinition of relationships with their birth family. Some do include birth family in program activities.

- Programs do not offer enough vocational training. Many youth do not have access to vocational assessments, and programs are steering too many to a limited range of training opportunities.

- Some programs have computers youth can use, but none offers formal computer skills training.

- No programs provide youth with driver's education.

- Most programs provide support to help youth achieve secondary education goals.
- Most long-term academic planning targeted toward post-secondary education is done through CFSA's Center of Keys for Life.

- Some providers have GED programs for youth who are struggling educationally and do not plan to pursue post-secondary education. While most youth without a high school diploma are either in school or a GED program, CFSA program monitors question how much progress some are making toward achieving the GED.

- Programs generally do not complete and review life skills assessments with youth.

- Youth have limited real-world opportunities to practice life skills. Few programs help youth learn to budget and prepare for financial independence.
- All youth receive a regular allowance.
- Programs offer a range of cultural, enrichment, and recreational activities (although some do so at times when youth cannot participate).
- Few programs help youth to identify post-foster care housing.
- Only teen mothers receive parenting skills training.

## Stakeholder Feedback

Youth and the adults who work with them shared their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of current District programming for adolescents in care. A series of focus groups tapped the insights and opinions of:

- Young adults who had aged out of foster care.
- Youth who will age out within 12 months.
- Younger youth in foster care.
- Teen parents in foster care.
- Teens involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Resource parents.
- CFSA Teen Services social workers.

In all, CFSA conducted seven focus groups with a total of 100 participants: 60 youth, 22 foster parents, and 18 CFSA staff. (CFSA had hoped to hold a focus group with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth but was unsuccessful in getting youth to participate.) CFSA also met with providers of independent living services and the CFSA program monitors for those services. While CFSA held most of these meetings specifically to inform this project, we also gained input in the course of some other meetings that touched on issues of parenting adolescents in foster care.

***The system pampers us. I don't even know how to do a resume. My worker did it for me.***

Distinct common themes emerged across groups. Many mirrored those raised in the best practices literature. We heard resounding consensus that the foster care system may coddle youth and, as a result, does not do a good job of preparing them for adulthood. Having so much guaranteed to youth in independent living programs without accountability or consequences sometimes de-motivates them to support themselves. Although voiced across the board, young adults who had aged out of foster care expressed this sentiment most strongly. Many spoke to the very difficult transition they faced and the importance of supports to them during the transition process.

Both foster parents and program staff felt that social worker intervention and government oversight constrained their ability to "parent" effectively. On the one hand, they are responsible

for teen actions and outcomes, yet they frequently feel unable to set and enforce ground rules and hold teens accountable.

Staff, youth, and foster parents all spoke to the harm done by "rewarding" youth who have trouble in a foster or group home with an apartment in an independent living program. Youth in particular said CFSA should establish and enforce clear guidelines for teens to enter independent living. They think youth should earn the privilege of independent living by working or being in school full-time.

Youth and providers also expressed concern about the sense of "entitlement" that some youth in independent living feel because they are guaranteed a large, regular monthly sum (for rent, food, clothing, etc.) whether or not they comply with program requirements. This contributes to provider inability to establish and enforce rules and limits the success of efforts to engage them in planning for their future.

***Don't just give us everything. Make us earn it. . . . You can't depend on the system to do everything for you.***

Youth want more responsibility and told us they are prepared to be held accountable for their actions. At the same time, programs need to make sure that youth are using their time constructively and taking responsibility for their lives. Youth expressed that rules need to be enforced consistently.

Youth were clear that adults need to start talking to adolescents in care earlier about the realities they will face at age 21. Waiting until youth are older is too late, especially for saving the kind of nest egg these young people felt they needed. They also spoke to how difficult the last years in and first years out of care could be. They felt that social workers should be more intensively involved with them for the last six months. Some expressed a need for more intensive life skills programs because youth in care don't understand what it's like to be on their own.

***I've learned how to budget money by watching other people suffer.***

The Center of Keys for Life is useful because it gives those youth who participate five years to build a bank account, but youth feel they do not know how to manage their money. They leave care with limited income and no credit.

Housing was one of the biggest concerns among young adults who had aged out of care. They cited logistical problems in transitioning from foster care to adulthood in the same apartment. If the independent living program failed to pay some of the previous rent, the landlord attempts to collect back rent directly from the youth. More distressing was inability to afford housing. Some youth spoke to the lack of Section 8 certificates while others wanted options beyond Section 8.

Young people expressed concern about limited program and activity options. They said they need more supportive services such as counseling, classes for new parents, and life skills training. They also want to participate in a full range of activities that includes art, dance, or gym memberships, not just remedial services such as tutoring. Youth felt resources are available in the community, but they do not get enough help in finding existing programs, including those at CFSA. They contrasted the lack of resources when they were younger with what felt like an

***You can't wait until I'm about to leave the system and then start throwing all these resources at me, especially when I don't even know what to do with them.***

excess of services as they neared adulthood, expressing concern that they were not sure which resources to use or how to use them and how to navigate the system. Youth were fearful that in the "blink of an eye," all the resources would be gone.

Youth raised concerns about placement decisions, relating personal experiences of being removed from bad situations and placed into worse and being placed inappropriately after a disruption. They also think that independent living programs should do a better job of screening and matching roommates because not everyone can live together. Many youth expressed fear that they do not have anyone they can rely on after they leave foster care.

Young people clearly voiced that they would like more support from their workers. They need to know that someone believes in them. Many felt too many adults had let them down. Their experiences with social workers ran the gamut from completely uninvolved to very involved and effective. Some youth who are doing well felt neglected because social workers give all of their attention to youth who are not doing well.

Staff and youth related a range of experiences with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives. Some youth had good Collaborative workers who were a real help to them. Others said that the Collaborative had not been of assistance in connecting them to resources. Some youth said they were referred just before they aged out; others had been referred earlier. Staff expressed frustration with difficulties in the referral process and lack of feedback after a referral.

Some youth talked about a disparity between the Collaborative to which CFSA referred them and the area of the District in which they are living or plan to live. Affordability and proximity to work, school, friends, or family often dictate youth housing choices. A Collaborative outside the geographic location that makes sense for the youth cannot help with services. This is especially true for those already living outside or planning to move out of the District.

Youth spoke to difficulty in accessing Medicaid or health insurance after they leave foster care. They described a gap between when they left care and when they were able to access Medicaid or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) directly. Others raised the impossibility of getting health insurance because they earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private insurance.

Other young people spoke to the frequency and speed with which they were placed in an acute care or residential facility, often for what they perceived as the wrong reasons (such as showing too much emotion).

Staff and providers shared a concern that rules governing District independent living programs (specifically Title 29, Chapter 63 of the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations) limit their ability to hold youth accountable and allow them to experience at least some consequences from real-world learning (such as making bad decisions and running out of money before the end of the month).

## New Program Design

Improving outcomes for adolescents in foster care in the District of Columbia has two aspects. One relates to **coordination** of service delivery and decisionmaking for teens. The other relates to **service delivery** itself and the specific services that social workers and providers offer youth.

## Coordination and Delivery of Services

All those who work with youth must adopt a consistent approach based on goals of ensuring we prepare every youth for the transition to adulthood and that youth leave care with at least one long-term adult connection. The foundation for this is clear and consistent policies and procedures for all aspects of services to adolescents, including eligibility for independent living programs. CFSA must also explore movement of youth among programs and how to reduce those movements so that youth receive the consistent life skills training they need during these critical years.

Adopting a youth development philosophy will require training for and buy-in of social workers, private providers, attorneys, judges, and others. CFSA should also work with providers to review and modify the District's independent living rules to address aspects currently hindering effective service delivery.

As with all adolescents, youth in care must develop the habits and skills they will need to support themselves into adulthood. Youth in foster care may get only limited or inconsistent adult guidance, exposure to positive adult role models, and opportunities to make decisions or choices about their own lives. To a certain extent, others make choices for them, and foster care rules define and constrain their lives. Unlike their peers not in foster care, they do not always have opportunities to learn how to make good choices, suffer the consequences of bad choices in a supportive manner, or learn to negotiate through give and take with parents and other adults.

Youth could already have access to a number of community providers and services, but providers and youth need to know about the services and how to use them. It will be difficult for youth to access the full range of community services as long as their social workers and case managers do not know about the services and ties between child welfare and other service providers are limited. CFSA needs to develop, maintain and disseminate a current, accurate source of information on service providers for youth and the adults who work with them.

## Establishing Benchmarks for Youth Development

Developing skills that will last a lifetime is neither a quick nor a one-time effort. It is a gradual process of developing specific assets and then building on them. For youth reaching adulthood in foster care and unable to count on any ongoing support after they leave care, these skills must be well developed by the time they reach age 21. Ensuring this requires that every youth achieve certain benchmarks. Pages 16 through 21 list recommended benchmarks in six key areas: life skills, permanent connections, education, employment, health, and housing.

## Next Steps

Over the next six months, CFSA will build on information from this review to create a comprehensive system that leads to better outcomes for our older youth.

### Phase One: September-December 2005

- Recruit and hire new Administrator for the Office of Youth Development and restructure Center of Keys for Life program to effectively engage and serve more of our youth.

- Implement a local version of a permanence model for older youth to secure families and/or life-long connections. Best practice examples being considered for implementation include the Massachusetts and New York models.

- Implement protocols to refer all youth to the Collaboratives on their 20th birthday. Begin transition team planning by convening a Family Team Meeting (FTM) to include (at minimum) the youth, social worker, attorney, Collaborative worker, independent living program caseworker, educational specialist, and natural mentors and supports identified by the youth. Through the FTM, participating adults will support the youth in developing a transition plan with clear assignments and commitments from all parties.

- Secure FY06 funding for Rapid Housing Program, which will allow CFSA to make sure that every youth leaving foster care has secure housing.

- Expand scholarships and college support for youth. Strategies include: solidify commitment by Capital One for youth scholarships, pursue Horatio Alger Foundation scholarship opportunity, and pursue partnership with Orphan Foundation for scholarships and college support services.

- Conduct an in-depth review of independent living regulations and make recommendations for possible changes. Complete the work of CFSA's Office of Youth Development/Office of Licensing and Monitoring in addressing independent living program regulation amendments and revisions.

- Implement pilot "host families" program to support youth who are away at college. Target 20 families for first year. Host families would provide placements for youth during school vacations and support year-round.

- Develop partnerships with successful community-based programs that can provide vocational assessments and skills training for youth.

- Award grant to establish mentoring program for youth aging out of foster care.

- Enter into and/or expand partnerships for employment services (including Job Corps and the District of Columbia Department of Employment Services).

- Develop strategy for strengthening partnerships with local and regional universities for post-secondary education for youth in care.

- Strengthen the communication strategy re: use of community resources.

## Phase Two: January-March 2006

- Develop new youth development training curriculum for social workers and independent living providers.

- Establish principles for independent living programs and criteria for placing youth in them.

- Pursue internships and apprenticeship opportunities for youth to explore careers in their chosen fields. Secure summer jobs and/or internships for all youth in college by March. Expand program to include all youth by Spring 2007.

- Identify and implement best practices for supporting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth.

- Work with independent living programs to redesign life skills curriculum to achieve age-appropriate benchmarks.

- Plan and design a tracking system to measure outcomes for youth after they leave foster care.

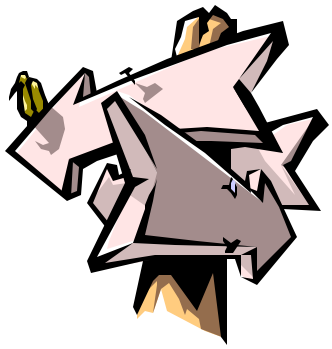
- Develop a handbook of community-based resources former foster youth can refer to after leaving the system. ■

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Case Planning/Life Skills

**Every youth should leave foster care having:**

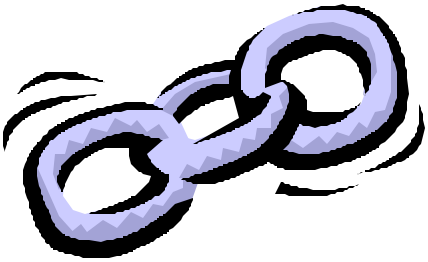
- **Learned how to make decisions and advocate for him/herself.**
- **Had the experience of making decisions about his/her life.**
- **Mastered a core set of life skills including a series of foundation skills, midpoint indicators, and preparedness indicators.**



| Age | Benchmarks |
|---|---|
| 15/16 | • Engage youth in developing a comprehensive plan to prepare for adulthood.<br>• Assist youth in completing an assessment of life skills that he/she has and/or needs using standard categorization.<br>• Ensure youth is participating in a skill-building program, whether through CKL or other comparable program.<br>• At least once a year, conduct a systematic review of youth's plan and progress or obstacles and support youth in making any revisions. |
| 17/18 | • Ensure youth continues to participate in skill-building program(s).<br>• At least once per year, conduct a systematic review of youth's plan and progress or obstacles and support youth in making any revisions.<br>• Ensure youth who have shown preparedness are given opportunities to practice life skills, whether through participation in independent living or through other program or responsibilities.<br>• Establish supports to help youth achieve mastery of at least midpoint indicators. |
| 19 | • At least once every six months, conduct systematic review of youth's plan and progress or obstacles and support youth in making any revisions.<br>• Ensure youth who have shown preparedness are given opportunities to practice life skills, whether through participation in independent living or through other program or responsibilities.<br>• Establish supports to help youth achieve mastery of preparedness indicators. |
| 20 | • Ensure all youth have opportunities to practice life skills, in programs or at levels for which they have shown preparedness.<br>• At least once every three months, conduct systematic review of youth's plan and progress or obstacles and support youth in making revisions. |

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Family/Permanent Connections



**Every youth should leave foster care with:**

- **Some opportunity to process feelings about his/her birth family.**
- **Ongoing connection to at least one positive, caring adult.**

| Age | Benchmarks |
|---|---|
| 15/16 | • Work with youth to explore any family (including extended family) who might be able to serve as a permanency plan resource.<br>• If no viable family resource is identified, work with youth to identify adults in or previously in his or her life who might be able to serve as a permanency plan resource.<br>• If no viable permanency resource is identified, work with youth to identify adults (family or not) who could be appropriate to serve as a permanent lifelong connection. Assist youth and identified adult in beginning to establish a natural mentoring relationship.<br>• Assist youth in beginning to work through any unresolved family issues.<br>• Encourage youth to reestablish and/or maintain family contacts as appropriate. |
| 17/18 | • If no permanency resource was previously established, at least once assist youth in reviewing family and non-family options for permanency.<br>• If no natural mentoring relationship was or can be identified, refer youth to a mentoring resource and ensure that a mentoring relationship is established.<br>• Assist youth in continuing to work through any unresolved family issues.<br>• Support youth in maintaining family contacts as appropriate. |
| 19 | • Ensure that youth has an identified, supportive adult resource. Assist as needed in helping to nurture that relationship.<br>• Assist youth in continuing to work through any unresolved family issues.<br>• Support youth in maintaining family contacts as appropriate. |
| 20 | • Ensure that youth has an identified, supportive adult resource. Assist as needed in helping to nurture that relationship.<br>• Assist youth in continuing to work through any unresolved family issues.<br>• Support youth in maintaining family contacts as appropriate.<br>• Refer youth to appropriate Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative for aftercare services. |

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Education

**Every youth should leave foster care with:**

- **A high school diploma or GED.**
- **Ability to complete a post-secondary degree or vocational training program.**

| Age | Benchmarks |
|---|---|
| **15/16** | • Assess youth's current school situation and create concrete plan for her/him to complete high school or GED, including specific steps to address meeting any gaps in required courses.<br>• Explore youth's interest in secondary education. Begin exposing youth to college campuses and enroll youth in CKL pre-college program. |
| **17/18** | • Ensure youth stays on track to complete degree, putting in place any needed remedial measures and/or ensuring access to summer school classes to address any needed courses.<br>• If youth intends to pursue secondary education, ensure comprehensive pre-college services.<br>• Support youth in exploring college options, applying for and choosing a college.<br>• Provide ongoing support to youth while in college.<br>• Assist youth in securing a summer internship that will allow exploration of career interests. |
| **19** | • Provide ongoing support to youth while in college.<br>• Assist youth in securing a summer internship that will allow exploration of career interests.<br>• Assist youth in developing plan to complete college after leaving foster care. |
| **20** | • Provide ongoing support to youth while in college.<br>• Assist youth in securing a summer internship that will allow exploration of career interests.<br>• Ensure youth has plan in place (including financing, support network) to complete college after leaving foster care. |
| **21-23** | • If applicable, provide support through Education and Training Voucher Program. |

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Employment/Vocation

**Every youth should leave foster care with:**

- **Basic employability skills.**
- **Employment experience that shows a progression of complexity, required skills, and responsibility.**
- **At least one identified career area or interest.**
- **An employment mentor and/or knowledge of where to go for help in expanding employment options or changing jobs.**

| Age | Benchmarks |
|---|---|
| **15/16** | • Explore youth's employment and/or vocational interests and help youth begin to map out degrees, skills and/or training required for possible fields of interest.<br>• Begin to develop youth's employment skills.<br>• Engage youth in job shadowing and/or volunteer activities.<br>• Ensure that youth obtains work experience (possibly through the summer youth employment program). |
| **17/18** | • Ensure that youth continues to obtain work experience while in school.<br>• Help youth explore, prepare for and/or enroll in any desired vocational training.<br>• Continue to develop youth's employment skills.<br>• Engage youth in internships and summer jobs.<br>• If youth does not plan to attend college or vocational training (or has completed vocational training), support and guide youth in job search and in maintaining employment. |
| **19** | • Ensure that youth continues to obtain progressively responsible work experience.<br>• Continue to develop and support youth's employment skills.<br>• If youth is not attending college or has completed vocational training, support and guide youth in any needed job search and in maintaining employment.<br>• If youth is not earning a living wage, engage youth in planning for additional training or skills development that will increase his or her earning potential. |
| **20** | • Support and guide youth in any needed job search and in maintaining employment.<br>• Ensure that youth continues to obtain progressively advancing work experience.<br>• Continue to develop and support youth's employment skills.<br>• If youth is not earning a living wage, engage youth in planning for additional training or skills development that will increase his or her earning potential. |

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Health/Mental Health

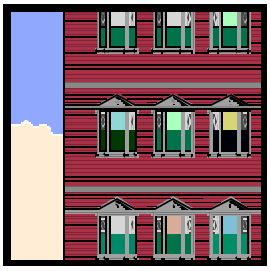
**Every youth should leave foster care with:**

- **Complete medical, dental, and mental health records.**
- **Understanding of any ongoing medical, dental, or mental health conditions.**
- **Ability to advocate for and obtain medical and mental health care.**
- **Connections to professionals for ongoing medical, dental, and/or mental health care.**

| Age | Benchmarks |
|---|---|
| 15/16 | • Help youth learn about preventive and routine health care, including the importance of regular medical appointments and use of prescription medications.<br>• Help youth begin to learn about any medical conditions he or she might have.<br>• Ensure that youth receives all appropriate medical care.<br>• Begin to compile full medical records for the youth. |
| 17/18 | • Ensure youth's continuing knowledge of preventive and routine health care.<br>• Help youth further develop understanding and acceptance of any medical conditions and take a proactive role in obtaining continuing medical care.<br>• Ensure that youth receives all appropriate medical care.<br>• Review medical records with youth, answer any questions, and identify any remaining gaps. |
| 19 | • Ensure youth's continuing knowledge of preventive and routine health care.<br>• Help youth further develop understanding and acceptance of any medical conditions and take a proactive role in obtaining continuing medical care.<br>• Ensure that youth receives all appropriate medical care.<br>• Review medical records with youth, answer any questions, and identify any remaining gaps. Track down material to fill gaps.<br>• Help youth begin to identify providers he/she will use after leaving foster care. |
| 20 | • Ensure youth's continuing knowledge of preventive and routine health care.<br>• Help youth further develop understanding and acceptance of any medical conditions and take a proactive role in ensuring continuing medical care.<br>• Ensure that youth receives all appropriate medical care.<br>• Ensure that youth has complete medical records.<br>• Ensure that youth has identified health insurance and medical care providers he/she will use after leaving foster care. |

***Benchmarks for Youth Development:***

# Housing



**Every youth should leave foster care with:**

- **Identified, affordable housing.**
- **Basic home maintenance skills.**

| *Age* | *Benchmarks* |
|---|---|
| **19** | • Help youth identify possible housing options, including prospective roommates.<br>• Ensure youth has developed life skills to maintain housing.<br>• Support youth in maintaining personal budget and projecting costs of living independently after foster care.<br>• Support youth in establishing and maintaining a savings plan. |
| **20** | • Help youth identify specific housing options, including prospective roommates.<br>• Ensure youth has developed life skills to maintain housing.<br>• Support youth in maintaining personal budget and projecting costs of living independently after foster care.<br>• Support youth in maintaining savings according to plan. |

## Bibliography


Casey Family Programs, *It's My Life* (Seattle, 2001).

Casey Family Programs, *It's My Life: Employment* (Seattle, 2004).

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, *Adolescence and the Transition to Adulthood: Rethinking Public Policy for a New Century* (2005).

Charles, Kristi and Jennifer Nelson, *Permanency Planning: Creating Life Long Connections; What Does it Mean for Adolescents?* (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, National Resource Center for Youth Development, 2000).

Child Welfare League of America, *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Transition, Independent Living, and Self-Sufficiency Services* (Washington, 2005).

Cook, Ronna and Sedlak, Andrea, "National Evaluation of Independent Living Programs," in Edmund V. Mech and Joan R. Rycraft (Eds.), *Preparing Foster Youths for Adult Living: Proceedings of an Invitational Research Conference* (Washington: Child Welfare League of America, 1995).

Courtney, Mark, Irving Piliavin, and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, *The Wisconsin Study of Youth Aging Out of Out-of-Home Care: A Portrait of Children about to Leave Care*, 1998.

Courtney, Mark and Irving Piliavin, *Foster Youth Transition to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After leaving Out-Of-Home Care* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998).

DeJesus, Edward, "Tales from the Bright Side: Conversations with Successful Graduates of Youth Employment Programs," in Andrew Sum, et al. (Eds.), *A Generation of Challenge: Pathways to Success for Urban Youth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, 1997).

Eilertson, Christine, *Independent Living for Foster Youth* (Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, February 2002).

Frey, Lauren, "Merging Permanency and Independent Living: Lifelong Family Relationships and Life Skills for Older Youth," *NRCYD Update*, Summer 2004.

Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Ruben G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr., "On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions," Network on Transitions to Adulthood Policy Brief, October 2004.

Greim, Jeffrey, "Summary of Public/Private Ventures' Investigation of Adult/Youth Relationship Programs," in Edmund V. Mech and Joan R. Rycraft (Eds.), *Preparing Foster Youths for Adult Living: Proceedings of an Invitational Research Conference* (Washington: Child Welfare League of America, 1995).

Kessler, Michelle, *The Transition Years: Serving Current and Former Foster Youth Ages Eighteen to Twenty-one* (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, National Resource Center for Youth Services, 2004).

LeBeau, Mary and Kim Stevens, CSR/Massachusetts Families for Kids-Lifelong Family Connections: An Adolescent Permanency Model, *NRCYD Update*, Summer 2004.

Louisell, Mardith J., *Model Programs for Youth Permanency* (Oakland: California Permanency for Youth Project, 2004).

Massinga, Ruth and Peter J. Pecora, "Providing Better Opportunities for Older Children in the Child Welfare System," *The Future of Children* 14:1, 2004.

Mech, Edmund V. and Joan R. Rycraft (eds.), *Preparing Foster Youths for Adult Living: Proceedings of an Invitational Research Conference* (Washington: Child Welfare League of America, 1995).

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development (NCWRCYD), *About Us*, available at nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd/aboutus/4core.htm.

New York City Administration for Children's Services (NYC ACS), "Families for Teens: Implementing Permanency Practice and Policy," N.D.

"Panel A: Readiness Research on Independent Living," in Edmund V. Mech and Joan R. Rycraft (Eds.), *Preparing Foster Youths for Adult Living: Proceedings of an Invitational Research Conference* (Washington: Child Welfare League of America, 1995).

Pecora, Peter J., et al., *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2005).

Rhodes, Jean E., "Natural and Assigned Mentor Relationships with At-Risk Youths: Promising Directions for Research and Intervention," in Edmund V. Mech and Joan R. Rycraft (Eds.), *Preparing Foster Youths for Adult Living: Proceedings of an Invitational Research Conference* (Washington: Child Welfare League of America, 1995).

Robertson, Robert M., Jr., "Walking the Talk: Organizational Modeling and Commitment to Youth and Staff Development," *Child Welfare*, Special Issue: Positive Youth Development, September/October, 1997.

Sanchez, Reina M., *Youth Perspectives on Permanency* (San Francisco: California Permanency for Youth Project, 2004).

Sheehy, Alfred M., Jr., et al., *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* (Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service and National Resource Center for Youth Services, N.D.).

Shirk, Martha and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004).

Sum, Andrew, et al., *A Generation of Challenge: Pathways to Success for Urban Youth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, 1997).

The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, *18 and Out: Life after Foster Care in Massachusetts* (2005).

Whalen, Samuel P., Jan DeCoursey and Ada Skyles, Preparing Youth for the Workforce: Exploring Employer Engagement in the Chicago Region (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, July 2003).

## Endnotes

[1] Furstenberg *et al*
[2] National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development
[3] CWLA, 2005, pp. 13-14
[4] Shirk and Stangler
[5] Shirk and Stangler, p. 10
[6] Pecora
[7] "Panel A: Readiness Research on Independent Living," p. 46
[8] Sheehy *et al*, p. 19 citing Dorothy Ansell
[9] Courtney *et al*
[10] Eilertson, p. 34
[11] Cook *et al* and Pecora
[12] Courtney and Pilivian
[13] Chapin Hall, p. 13
[14] DeJesus, pp. 63-64
[15] Whalen *et al*, p. vii
[16] Frey, Louisell
[17] DeJesus, p. 61
[18] DeJesus, p. 63
[19] Greim, pp. 108-109
[20] Rhodes, p. 115